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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000049

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (PATTERSON/HAYES); DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/20/2019

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KDEM KPAO TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIAN PROTESTS CONTINUE DESPITE CEASEFIRE

REF: TUNIS 41 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Even after Israel declared a ceasefire on January 17, independent opposition groups and the labor federation staged three separate protests on January 17 and 19 with GOT permission. The demonstrations were characterized by a heavy police presence, and security forces did not allow observers to linger. Protestors have remained focused on the situation in Gaza, though there were some undercurrents of anti-American and anti-GOT sentiment. End Summary.

All Together Now

¶12. (C) Even after Israel and Hamas declared ceasefires on January 17 and 18 respectively, demonstrations protesting the violence in Gaza continued. The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD) and some other independent NGOs held a protest the morning of January 17 in downtown Tunis. This was followed by another protest that same day organized by the umbrella labor federation (UGTT). According to PolOff and other observers, both demonstrations attracted sizable crowds of roughly 1,000 people. There was a heavy police presence, and security forces did not allow observers to linger.

¶13. (C) The opposition at-Tajdid ("Renewal") party, Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (FDTL) asked for and received permission to hold their own demonstration on January 19. According to the editor of the PDP's Arabic weekly al-Mowqif Rachid Khachana, roughly 4,000 people took part in the opposition march. (NB: Others have suggested that participation may have been closer to 1,000.) Khachana said that the opposition parties wished to hold their own protest to demonstrate their independence from the RCD. Though they had initially requested permission to hold the event in the afternoon, the GOT asked that it be held in the morning, and the opposition parties agreed. Khachana attributed the change in time to an effort by the GOT to control the number of demonstrators. Had the event been staged in the afternoon, high school students could have participated.

¶14. (C) During the marches, protestors were clearly focused on the situation in Gaza. There were, however, some demonstrators who reportedly chanted anti-US and anti-GOT slogans. According to Tunisian bloggers and one eyewitness, these chants included, "No US Embassy in Tunisia," "Down with the Torturer of the People, Down with the RCD," "Gafsa, Gaza, Symbols of Dignity," and "The Tunisian Regime is Cowardly and

a US Agent." Security forces maintained order but did not interfere with the protestors.

Comment

15. (C) As public sentiment about the situation in Gaza continues to run high, the GOT has remained careful to cast itself as a supporter of the Palestinian people. Thus, it has not stopped recent protests and has even allowed opposition parties to organize events. The GOT may regret this decision, however, now that some protests have turned more anti-GOT in tone. Some protesters have drawn an explicit linkage between the situations in Gaza and Gafsa, the site of unemployment riots for six months last year. Given the nature of the last few demonstrations, and the ceasefire in Gaza, it is likely the GOT will restrict and quite probably stop future protests. End Comment.

Godec